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ABSTRACT

In spite of the many problems and challenges facing the superintendency, there are positive aspects of the job. The high degree of job satisfaction that superintendents report can only be accounted for by factors, issues, or challenges that are viewed as positive, not negative. This study surveyed superintendents to determine those aspects of the job that account for the high degree of job satisfaction and the high number of superintendents who indicated they would choose the superintendency again if given the opportunity. The literature provides many negative features, yet most of the individuals who perform the job every day do not view their job in a negative way. The study sought to determine what is right about the superintendency and what motivates one to pursue the position as a career. Surveys were sent to superintendents in Indiana, Texas, and Illinois. Strong reasons for liking the job included the following: provides input into the direction of the school district; impacts students; builds a team of educators; makes a difference in teaching and learning; meets daily challenges; and uses the skills the superintendent possesses. Weakest reasons for liking the job included is well paid, influences community decisions, is in control of one's schedule, and enjoys working with the board of education. (Contains 18 references.) (DFR)

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What's Right About the School Superintendency?

INTRODUCTION

The superintendency is a career position that is filled with challenges and opportunities. The leader of a school district links with the past, present, and future through our nation's greatest resource -- its people. Superintendents of public school districts hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation. Superintendents are the education leaders and the main link between their respective districts and communities (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). The clamor for school reform, a sharp focus on accountability, and an urgent imperative for blending managerial and progressive leadership, have made the superintendent an enticing target for criticism. In the past, the job was structured and predictable because schools were required to maintain the status quo. The job today demands the superintendent to be a change agent who is constantly adapting to a myriad of social, economic and political conditions (Malone, 1999).

Portrayal of the superintendency in the professional literature seems to have a focus on the negative aspects of the job. There are individuals who seek the position, individuals who derive feelings of accomplishment from the position, and individuals who, at the end of their life's work, indicate they would seek the position again if given the opportunity. There are aspects of the job that motivate aspiring administrators to accept the challenges of the position. Unfortunately, in a time of crisis when the applicant pool is low and the quality of the candidates is questionable, there is little in the literature that can be used as positive features to attract candidates.

Expectations for superintendents are unrealistically high, and while the expectations of the job are soaring, there are fewer people who want the job (Chaddock, 1999). Reasons for the

drop-off in applications include "the total pressure of the job." Superintendents are expected to work actively to transform, restructure, and redefine schools, yet they hold an organizational position that is historically and traditionally committed to resisting change and maintaining stability. Consequently, superintendents are quitting, being dismissed, or retiring early because they have failed to deliver the quick educational fixes demanded of them (Dale, 1990; Sherer, 1995). Those who remain take on a determined outlook that somehow, some way, they will see their programs through and ultimately prevail.

The present shortage of candidates to fill superintendent positions, the increasing demand for reform, and the painful thrust imposed on superintendents to provide ready solutions seldom contain considerations of the superintendent's performance in the context of managing scarce resources. Reasons associated with the high turnover rate among school superintendents include financial problems in the district (including budget cuts), low salaries, and inadequate staffing (Scherer, 1995). The high turnover rate is complicated by a shortage of administrative candidates for leadership positions in schools (Houston, 1998). It is further complicated by the shortage of minorities and women.

The editor of the American School Board Journal wrote that "no recent year has seen such wholesale changes in superintendents and other higher school positions as the present year. In the Middle-west, there has been a perfect storm of unrest culminating in wholesale resignations, dismissals, and new appointments." (Callahan, 1962, p. 54, as quoted in Sharp &Walter, 1997, p. 16). The year of this Journal quotation was 1913, so superintendent tenure is not a new issue. A study in Wisconsin examined the length of service of 1,528 superintendents over a 32-year period. This study concluded that the median years in one location (as superintendent) was four years, with a mean career length of seven years (Campbell, 1990, p.

249). The tenure of school superintendents, especially in urban districts, is getting shorter. In the decade of the 90s, the media reported the tenure of urban superintendents as two-and-one-half years. However, in 1992, Glass reported that most superintendents spent 15 years in the position in no more than three districts and that about three-quarters of them had retained their jobs for five or six years (Glass, 1992). In the 2000 study, Glass, Bjork & Brunner analyzed the tenure of a superintendent by dividing the total number of years a person had served in the superintendency by the number of superintendencies the person had held. The process yielded a figure of five to six years per district served. Successful superintendents know the value of continuity in leadership. Those who have been successful usually find ways of maintaining their leadership capacity over extended periods of time that enables them to complete the task at hand. Perseverance of the leader during times of crises enables him/her to experience the satisfaction of task completion, a sense of accomplishment, and the feeling of a contribution made.

Years ago, an author who only identified himself as a Veteran Fighter in the Field of American Education made the following statement, as quoted by Callahan (1962):

> The point I wish to make is that nothing, absolutely nothing, is of more vital consuming interest to the average superintendent than the tremendously important question of whether he will be retained in his present position for the coming year...He knows from statistics, observations and experiences that he is in the most hazardous occupation known to insurance actuaries. Deep sea diving and structural steel work have nothing on the business of school superintending. Lloyds will insure the English clerk against rain on his week-end vacation, but no gambling house would be sufficiently reckless to bet on the chances of re-election for school superintendents three years or even two years ahead (p. 205).

The preceding paragraphs lead one to conclude that the superintendency is a thankless and impossible job; however, there seems to be some evidence that superintendents view the position differently. Superintendents indicate that they gain a great deal of satisfaction from their jobs. In 1992, Glass reported sixty-one percent of the superintendents felt a "considerable" fulfillment in their jobs. Eight years later, Glass reported the "considerable" figure as fifty-six percent with thirty-four percent reported feeling "moderate fulfillment or satisfaction." While the figure is down, fifty-six percent is still high when one considers the stress levels of the job (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). In a 1999 study, over fifty percent of the superintendents who responded in Indiana reported their job as "very rewarding" and almost forty percent reported it as "somewhat rewarding" (Malone, 1999). And, two-thirds of the superintendents in Glass, Bjork & Brunner's 2000 study indicated they would choose the superintendency again as a profession. What is there about the position that would account for such a high endorsement?

To be sure, serious challenges face the superintendency. There is a preponderance of evidence that the superintendency of the latter part of the twentieth century has not attracted the pool of human resources that is required to man the nation's schools. Why? As city leaders search for educators to solve a host of urgent problems (problems that the school system was not designed, nor prepared to combat), the tenure of its stewards is dwindling (Starr, 1991). The increasing demand for superintendents is caused by factors that are not directly related to professional manpower shortage; rather, it deals with the complex politics of the position and the unrealistic expectations of the job in the face of scarce resources. "We are making it harder to judge whether superintendents are doing a good job, because we're constantly expanding expectations" (Hess, 1999). Such expectations have contributed to the high turnover rate in the superintendency (Lindsay, 1994; Renchler, 1992). Can the high turnover rate be interpreted to

the risk taker as a challenge, and, can such problems become motivational factors for those who would risk failure in resolving them?

Not withstanding the problems and challenges facing the superintendency; however, there are positive aspects of the job. The high degree of job satisfaction that superintendents report can only be accounted for by factors, issues or challenges that are viewed as positive, not negative. The intent of this study was to survey superintendents to determine those aspects of the job that account for the high degree of job satisfaction and the high number of superintendents who indicate they would choose the superintendency again if given the opportunity. What's right about the superintendency and what motivates one to pursue the position as a career? The literature provides many negative features, yet most of the individuals who perform the job every day do not view their job in a negative way at all.

THE PROBLEM

Leadership is inextricably tied to the success of any school district, and competition for the best and brightest who would lead a school district is keen. The picture of the superintendency as an impossible or undesirable profession damages the aspirations of those who would seek such an important position. There is evidence to indicate the negative picture that is painted in the literature is simply inaccurate. If the superintendency contains so many negative features, why do superintendents report high degrees of job satisfaction and recommend their chosen profession to those who would follow? While superintendents might agree with the negative features of their job as reported in the literature, are the features so daunting as to convince one to leave or not recommend the position to aspiring administrators? What motivates one to become a

superintendent? The professional literature is not clear concerning job satisfaction and motivational features of the superintendency.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A good sound relationship between the superintendent and board of education is critical to success in the superintendency. This relationship is "crucial, not only for the job security of the superintendent, but also for the efficient management of the school district (Sharp & Walter, 1997, p. 89). Glass (1992) reported that superintendents who were fired and/or encouraged to resign usually did so when their personal relationships with the school board broke down. Personal relationships become strained when individual board members have personal agenda that may or may not promote the overall good of the district. A reason for the high turnover in the superintendency is an increase in single board issue members who get elected only to get a teacher fired or to press a narrow agenda (Chaddock, 1999).

Giles (1990) reported 85 percent of the superintendents who experienced "involuntary turnover," cited a conflicting political agenda of the board as a major concern for their leaving. Metzger (1997) corroborated Giles' finding and added another--the conflicting political agenda of individual board members. Situations described under this theme included frequent board member turnover, power struggles among members of the board, disagreements over roles and responsibilities between the board and superintendent or among board members, conflicting priorities, or differences concerning community culture. Other factors highlighted were financial problems in the district, union problems, and collective bargaining issues (Scherer, 1995). While superintendents rank their problems with the board as a barrier to entering the superintendency and a negative aspect of the job, many superintendents view their relationships with their board

as a source of greatest support (Malone, 1999). Superintendents who articulate a clear vision for the direction they want the school district to go usually enjoy good working relationships with their board. Consistent board support leads to extended years of service from the superintendent. and continuity of leadership is an essential ingredient in school success. Good superintendent/ school board relations constitute one of the most attractive features of a given superintendency. On the other hand, controversies between the superintendent and the school board tend to be one of the most serious features that detract from a vacant superintendent's position (Cox & Malone, 2001).

Interestingly, salaries and fringe benefits have not been a major factor in determining attraction to the superintendency. Although low salaries have been cited as a reason for change of assignment, it has been limited to change in districts and not the career. In fact, studies show that superintendents now earn satisfactory pay especially in large, urban districts (Kowalski, 1999).

A significant trend in the operation of schools is the power shift to more decision-making at the local school level. This trend has changed the way schools are governed and how resources are managed. The superintendent is called upon to provide a different kind of leadership in which he/she must work more closely with building level administrators to manage and lead the school district. Such a change in leadership philosophy entails more precision in personnel selection, more expertise in collaborative leadership and more involvement of personnel, namely teachers, who have not been trained traditionally in school governance. Is the prospect of becoming a change agent a motivator for going into the superintendency or moving from one superintendency to another?

The philosophy of involving personnel in decision-making at the level most affected by the decision seems crucial. It also represents a significant shift from the traditional brokering of power

to the sharing of power with constituencies who traditionally have not sought the power nor accepted it responsibly when such empowerment was offered. Shared governance is one of the primary mainstays of educational reform: however, in the heyday of high stakes testing, the professional literature offers little evidence linking shared governance to increased student achievement.

The clamor for school accountability is at the heart of school reform. New Indiana legislation commonly called the "accountability bill" (P. L. 221) represents a commitment of the state to follow the trend towards site-based decision-making. Candidates aspiring to the superintendency need sound preparation in collaborative decision making and staff development techniques for empowering teachers, while at the same time possessing the skills for negotiating successfully with hostile teacher unions. The concept of shared governance with the individual school's improvement committee and the principal of the school calls for tremendous change. Change is a motivator for some people in the superintendency, yet for these individuals change has become a familiar commodity in their job.

METHODOLOGY

The design of the study called for survey methodology. The members of the Indiana Public School Study Council, a group of 25 school superintendents, were asked to write out what they liked about being a superintendent. These responses were then edited and formed the basis for the statements placed in the survey that was used in this study. The primary data source for the study came from a selected sample of the superintendents in Indiana, Illinois and Texas. The names and addresses were obtained from official lists from state departments of education and/or superintendent

organizations in the three states. Surveys were mailed to a 15% sample of the superintendents in each of the three states with instructions for the participants to return the surveys via enclosed self-addressed stamped envelopes.

All data entered into the database were processed anonymously and reported in aggregate form. This process allowed the researchers to report the data in such a way that individual participants were not identified. Participants had been assured of confidentiality in a letter that introduced the study and encouraged participation.

In Illinois, 46 of 100 surveyed superintendents responded for a return rate of 46%; in Indiana, 20 of 40 superintendents responded for a rate of 50%; and, in Texas, 53 of 100 returned surveys for a rate of 53%. The data were subjected to a frequency analysis using SPSS 10.0 for Windows at Teachers College, Ball State University.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, the superintendents were given a survey and asked to respond to this question, "What do you like about being a superintendent?" They rated each statement from one to five, where "1" meant a weak reason for liking the job and "5" meant a very strong reason for liking the job. Of the seventeen statements in the survey, the one that received the highest percentage of "5" responses was the following:
"I have substantial input into the direction of the school district; to be part of the progress we make." (rated as a "5" by 81.5% of the responding superintendents)

The statement which received the second highest percentage, 70.3%, was "I have an opportunity to impact students." The next highest statements were as follows:

"I have an opportunity to build a team of educators." (68.1%)

"I can make a difference in teaching and learning." (60.2%)

"I always have daily challenges in this job." (60.2%)

"I am able to utilize the skills that I have." (58.8%)

At the other end of the spectrum, the weakest reason for liking the job was "I like the high visibility that this job has. (18.6%) This was followed by the following "weak" reasons for liking the job:

"I am well paid for this job." (20.3%)

"I can influence community decisions. (24.6%)

"I am in control of my daily schedule." (27.1%)

"I enjoy working with the board of education." (27.7%)

Those outside the superintendent's office often note that the superintendent makes a very good salary and has more freedom in his/her schedule than others in the school district. And, they sometimes mention that the job has a high visibility which satisfies the ego of the superintendent. While all of these are true to some extent, these are not the main reasons that the responding superintendents like their jobs. They feel that they can make a difference in their districts by setting direction, becoming a part of the district's progress, and by building a team of educators in order to improve teaching and learning for students. They feel that their skills are utilized in the superintendency, possibly more than they were in other educational positions that they have held. And, they like the fact that they have daily challenges in their jobs.

People who work with superintendents on a regular basis or hear them speak at meetings and conferences know that they are very dedicated educators whose primary objective is to improve the educational experiences of the students in their districts. These perceptions are congruent with the selections of the responding superintendents as to what they like about their jobs.

Since the public perception of the superintendent is a person who is constantly under fire and almost trapped in a thankless job that no one would ever seek, we asked these superintendents about their job satisfaction. Overall, 41.2% said that their job satisfaction was "very high," with another 45.4% saying it was "high." Thus, 86.6% rated their overall job satisfaction as high or very high. At the other end, only 1.6% rated their job satisfaction as low or very low. And, when asked if they had it all over to do again, would they become superintendents, 93.2% said that they would choose their positions again. It is true that superintendents are under fire, and it is true that sometimes it is a thankless job. But, these superintendents do not feel trapped in this position. They are very satisfied with the job and would choose it again.

What's Right About the School Superintendency? A great deal. Superintendents feel that they can make a substantial impact in the district in teaching and learning and impact the education of children. There is a great satisfaction in being able to have that feeling, and that satisfaction carries over to the overall rating of their job satisfaction and their strong statement that they would do it all over again if given a chance. This should be good news for people considering a career in the superintendency: Do not be put off by some of the negative aspects of the job. They are real, of course, but the positive

aspects far outweigh these negative aspects, and they also are important contributions to education and to American society.

This paper concludes with a quote from one of the giants of educational administration, Ellwood P. Cubberly (1922):

> He [the superintendent] must not lose confidence in himself, for out of confidence in himself come almost all his other powers... The world always steps aside to let a man pass who knows where he is going, but it often crushes the man who does not know whither he is bound. He must not repose too much confidence in other people. To trust subordinates and friends wisely, but not too much, is something he must learn. Sustained by the justice of this cause, and guided by an educational philosophy that gives point and direction to his administrative labors, he must not take as personal the criticisms, reverses, and even the humiliations of which he must expect and accept his full share. He must not underestimate to himself the value of his services, nor must he expect the people to appreciate fully what he is doing for them. A superintendent of schools works distinctly for the next generation, without becoming egotistical or autocratic, his own personal sense of the importance of his work must be his own greatest reward (p. 156).

DEMOGRAPHICS:

The superintendents had been in education for a mean of 28.2 years, ranging from six to 51 years, and in the superintendency itself for a mean of 8.7 years, ranging from one to 41 years. Also, 39.1% have four or fewer years as a superintendent.

Of the superintendents responding, 87.3% were male with 12.7% female, which is similar to the percentages found in other studies.

When asked about the district size in student enrollment, 34.5% had 1000-2499 students, 26.9% had under 500 students, 19.3% had 500-999 students, 9.2% had 2500-3999 students, 5.9% had over 6000 students, and 4.2% had 4000-6000 students.

In terms of age, 44.1% were 51-55 years of age, 19.5% were 56-60, 12.7% were 46-50, 11.0% were 41-45, 5.1% were 61-65, 5.1% were 36-40, 1.7% were under 35, and 0.8% were over 65. When asked if they were eligible to retire with full benefits today, 39.0% said that they were, and 61% replied negatively.

While superintendents are perceived as quite mobile, it did not extend much out of their own state. Of those responding, 84.9% said that all of their teaching experience was in the state where they were now living, and 89.9% said that all of their administrative experience was in that same state. This was a first superintendency for 61.3% of the superintendents, a second superintendency for 26.9%, a third for 8.4%, a fourth for 1.7%, and a sixth for 1.7%. (No one noted a fifth superintendency.)

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